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ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS

Letter dated 27 May 1999 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General**

I have the honour to transmit herewith information from the Russian Federation State Committee on Environmental Protection regarding the negative effects on the environment of the military aggression by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Economic and Social Council under item 13 of the provisional agenda of its substantive session of 1999.

(Signed) Sergey LAVROV

* E/1999/100 and Add.1.

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ANNEX

Russian Federation State Committee on Environmental Protection: Information note dated 24 May 1999 on the negative effects of the military action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The deliberate bombing of environmentally hazardous sites and the ever increasing scale of the destruction of the environment bear witness to the fact that local military operations are being transformed into large-scale environmental warfare.

The military operations will have the most negative impact on the ecological security of European countries. The probability of missiles striking one of the nuclear power stations in Hungary, Romania, Slovenia or Bulgaria cannot be ruled out. People living within 300 to 500 kilometres of these facilities might be affected by radiation. Tens of millions of people would thus become victims of such a "mistake" by NATO forces. The launching of NATO ground operations would only exacerbate the alarming environmental situation in the region. There are fears that the missile and bomb attacks on Belgrade may damage nuclear storage facilities. Already, 5,000 tons of bombs have been dropped and more than 1,500 cruise missiles launched against Yugoslav territory, resulting in the pollution of the environment.

Ammunition containing depleted uranium is being used in the strikes against Yugoslavia. The use of similar ammunition by the United States military in previous armed conflicts (the Persian Gulf, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) has led to an increase in the incidence of cancer among the local populations, while 80,000 people have developed "Gulf War syndrome". The United Nations prohibited the use of such "barbaric shells" as long ago as 1996.

The pollutants in the Danube may cause the cooling systems of the Cernavodă (Romania) and Kozloduy (Bulgaria) nuclear power stations to malfunction. Oil pollution may result in an emergency situation with grave environmental consequences.

Yugoslavia has published lists of so-called "black spots", where damage could have extremely dangerous consequences. Nevertheless, chemical plants are being systematically bombed, despite the fact that their destruction represents a particular threat to the environment.

Fires at chemical plants are releasing into the atmosphere such persistent organic pollutants as dioxins and furans, which are highly carcinogenic and mutagenic. Substances harmful to human health, resulting from the fires burning at oil depots and refineries, have already reached Polish airspace and are approaching Finland. The anticyclone which is expected shortly may carry the poisonous mixture to the territory of Hungary, Greece and Italy. The level of atmospheric pollution caused by the substances resulting from the oil fires has already exceeded the permitted maximum levels by two to three times.

Spills and discharges from destroyed oil refineries and chemical and pharmaceuticals plants represent the greatest danger. The pollution of the Danube, and of the soil and groundwater, should also be counted among the negative effects. An oil slick has been observed on the Danube following the destruction of oil refineries in Serbian territory, particularly in the city of Novi Sad.

The continuation of the bombing is exacerbating the pollution of the atmosphere, and of soil, water bodies and groundwater, not only in the territory of Yugoslavia, but also in other European countries. As a result of the transborder transfer of the substances produced by the burning of oil depots, chemical plants and oil refineries, there is a real danger that the territory of other States, first and foremost Albania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, will be polluted by highly toxic substances (dioxins, furans, sulphate and nitrate compounds, etc.). The high persistence of these substances and their capacity to accumulate in the soil may lead to long-term contamination of the products of animal husbandry and agriculture.

As a result of the NATO bombing, four of Kosovo's seven oil depots have been destroyed, as well as two of Yugoslavia's two largest oil refineries, and the water supply systems in the cities of Novi Sad and Sombor have been damaged. The populations of these towns have been left without a centralized water supply, which may lead to mass outbreaks of infectious diseases. Oil depots in Niš and Lopatnica have again been struck.

There is a risk that pollutants resulting from the destruction of the oil depots and refineries will spread through the Danube and other rivers over large areas of Europe.

The barbaric destruction of key installations of the Belgrade water supply system is creating a real threat of epidemics of water-borne diseases.

An analysis of the data available to the State Committee of the Russian Federation has shown that the bombing is causing continuing chemical pollution of the atmosphere, soil, water bodies and groundwater. Fires are breaking out at the destroyed plants, and thick clouds of smoke cover the outskirts of the towns.

The Lower Danube is a source of drinking water for tens of millions of people, and its pollution is especially dangerous for an ecosystem such as the Danube delta and the birds, sturgeon and other species that inhabit it.

Dead fish killed by environmental pollution are already being found in Yugoslavia's rivers. The total damage resulting from the aggression is estimated at US$ 100 billion.

The natural way of life in wildlife areas is being disrupted. According to a report by the Ministry of the Environment of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, animal species not typical of that Republic have migrated to it from neighbouring Yugoslavia.

The use by NATO aircraft of ammunition containing graphite pellets is causing long-term environmental damage in the countries of the Balkan region. The destruction of electric power stations and transformer units is disrupting the functioning of life-support systems. The disabling of systems for treating municipal and industrial effluents may lead to the pollution of watercourses and the outbreak of epidemics, not only in Yugoslavia, but also in neighbouring States.